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# SGF

STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

*The Gothic and the Carnavalesque in American Culture*, by Timothy Jones.  
Cardiff, U of Wales P, 2015. 256 pages,  
\$160.00. ISBN 978-1-78316-192-8

by Jeffrey Cass

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***The Gothic and the Carnavalesque in American Culture,*  
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In his well-documented and lively book, Timothy Jones argues for a carnivalesque gothic within American culture that distinguishes itself from more traditional, literary studies of the Gothic by concentrating on the playful surfaces of Gothic narratives and the pleasures that their “Gothic carnival” evoke in the reader, rather than the more serious practices of a literary Gothic that interrogates the depths of the historical “real.” With Charles G. Finney’s *The Circus of Dr. Lao* as his textual touchstone, Jones stresses that the carnival gothics within American culture “potentially delight, thrill and amuse their audience,” (3) but their intent is not necessarily to instruct or moralize, succinctly suggesting that carnival gothics valorize “erotics before hermeneutics” (4). Drawing on Bourdieu’s theoretical notion of *habitus*, which, for Jones, means the practical or commonsense knowledge about the ways in which common readers instinctively appreciate the practice of the Gothic text that inculcates pleasure, Jones decouples the activity of this form of Gothic textual practice from the literary one because he believes that the *habitus* of the Gothic carnival mode is an end unto itself, largely ignored in recent studies precisely because the Gothic field has vigorously attempted to establish its rightful place within literary studies and, as a result, ignores the practical allure of Gothic pleasure. For Jones, therefore, “Gothic texts are sources of thrill before they are sources of meaning” (35). His book is a discursus into the origins, development, and nature of the pleasures of the carnivalesque gothic, beginning with the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, skipping to the twentieth century with a chapter on pulp horror with focused discussion on H.P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith, and then continuing the line of carnival gothics with chapters on Ray Bradbury, EC Comics, Stephen King, and more contemporary writers, such as Anne Rice and Neil Gaiman.

Theoretically, Jones’s mentor is Mikhail Bakhtin, whose book, *Rabelais and His World*, underpins the “topsy turvy” nature of carnival, gleefully rejecting conventionality, overturning accepted social practices and procedures, and, for however limited a time, running riot over hierarchies of meaning. To paraphrase Bakhtin, it is a world turned upside down. In the world of carnival gothics, readers are “asked to withhold or bracket their moral judgments,” giving license to enjoy wickedness without endorsing wrongness. The “topsy turvy” nature of the Gothic carnival mode differentiates itself from the more “serious” Gothic texts that emphasize the historical real. This differentiation helps explain why Jones wishes to emphasize a writer like Poe, whose carnivalesque influence extends well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but whose writings do not “ask to be taken seriously,” unlike, say, Hawthorne, who “loads” his stories with a historically Puritan *mythos* because he wishes readers to decode and learn from them and not simply revel in the stories’ Gothic pleasures.

Poe’s canonicity conflicts with Jones’s intent on reconstructing him as a precursor and progenitor of the carnival gothics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. “To enjoy Poe’s tales, to immerse oneself in the fierceness of the delight of their horror, often requires the adoption of a carnivalesque reading practice,” which means abandoning “the polite and rational” world of critical inquiry (69). Unearthing a purer Poe in this manner just means to establish a reading practice for the next generation of the American Gothic, which includes the storied endeavors of *Weird Tales*. Lovecraft’s edgy “Cthulhu mythos,” Clark Ashton Smith’s Orientalized *Zothique*, and Robert E. Howard’s racialized “Black Canaan” and “Pigeons from Hell” illustrate the “delicious shudders,” a phrase Jones borrows from Herbert

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Jordan, one of the early readers of *Weird Tales*. These works produce what Jones labels “subjunctivity,” the “creation of order as if it were truly the case” (Jones 38). Borrowing from another theorist, unnamed in this case, Louis Althusser, Jones suggests that this pulp “subjunctivity” interpellates the reader into the fields of horror, immersing them in the text’s Gothic pleasures, rather than allowing readers to retain critical distance, as they might while reading the works of more “writerly” Gothic stories within the literary canon. The chapter’s “pulp subjunctives” are followed by a chapter on the October “aura” of Ray Bradbury, whom, Jones reminds us, *Time* describes as a “poet of the pulps.” Again emphasizing the nominally real modes of Bradbury’s fiction, particularly that in *The October Country*, *Dandelion Wine*, and *The Martian Chronicles*, Jones makes use of Walter Benjamin’s discussions of the aura, in which “figures ... encounter unusual and compelling atmospheres, objects, and events” (101). The “aura” in this case is a close cousin of “subjunctivity” because it holds reality in abeyance. It necessitates “an encounter with something close to us that cannot be touched, that remains unattainable, inaccessible, perhaps ghostly” (110). That Bradbury keeps the reader in suspense through the not-quite-definite portrayal of reality works well for the books cited above and explains a great deal about Bradbury’s fictional intentions. Ironically, the aura as a concept does *not* work well with Bradbury’s one novel about an actual carnival, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, whose Gothic mood animates an exciting bildungsroman, but which Jones amazingly brushes off by concluding only that the novel, in the end, “prefers the real,” with Jones oddly suggesting that “the symbols [the novel] offers ultimately render to an unproductive ambiguity; they do not quite make sense” (101). “Not making sense,” particularly as it alludes to the historical real, would seem to be the point of irrational Gothic titillations, which, heretofore, Jones had been proffering as the essence of the carnivalesque. One suspects that the real problem in Jones’s reading with *Something Wicked This Way Comes* lies in the fact that the boys in the novel “grow up” by overcoming Cooger and Dark’s nightmare travelling show and enter a more defined adulthood through its defeat. That’s far too conclusive and moralistic an ending to maintain the “delicious shudders” of the gothic carnival or the subjunctivity of Gothic fantasy.

Chapters on EC Comics and the culture of American Goth in popular culture are the best vehicles for Jones’s thesis principally because comics and film are better, more immediate textual modes for promoting the primacy of pleasure. The sections on EC Comics are especially good because Jones, in this case, spends some time on the

historical contexts for the comics that commodified horror in such successful fashion and then were eviscerated by publicity-seeking politicians and a conservative backlash against a culture that seemingly promoted violence and sexual promiscuity. William Gaines, the publisher, testified before Senator Estes Kefauver’s subcommittee on juvenile delinquency, explicitly noting, “Pleasure is what we sell, entertainment, reading enjoyment” (123). Jones recalls how Gaines neatly plays into the public’s paranoia about the effects of comics on the everyday lives of consumers, and, with the rise of commentators like Dr. Wertham, the psychoanalyst who believed that boys reading about Batman and Robin would naturally embrace homosexuality, Gothic comic horror was eliminated from publishing venues for several years. In contextualizing the reading tastes of the time, however, Jones continues to make the point that the universes given by EC Comics, particularly the “hosted” universes of the Crypt-Keeper, the Vault-Keeper, and the Old Witch, operated “within a ‘real’ of some sort, where everyday routines are interrupted by Gothic irruptions of violence, depravity, and the supernatural” (127-128). The point of these anthologized stories is that the “moral” is “evacuated of any meaningful value,” replaced instead with the kinds of delicious “shuddering” we see in Lovecraft’s horror fiction (129). Similarly, the shock value of “Gothic irruptions” suggests itself in films that explore the terrain of Goth culture. Jones includes discussions of Lestat as rock musician in *The Vampire Lestat*, the nihilistic death rockers from Dan O’Bannon’s *The Return of the Living Dead*, and, finally, the MTV rock generation as presented in Joel Schumacher’s *The Lost Boys*. In all cases, the rock band becomes a *figura*, the rhetorical occasion for Goth performance, a testament to the thrill of darkness, the fragility of mortality, and the fleeting nature of Gothic pleasure.

At times, of course, Jones’s study, despite his erudition and enthusiasm, seems a bit idiosyncratic. To appropriate Joseph Wittreich’s term, it is hard sometimes to see a carnivalesque “line of vision” that extends from Poe to H.P. Lovecraft and *Weird Tales*, to Ray Bradbury, to Stephen King, to Goth culture and film. Part of the problem lies in his extraction of these wonderful works from the Gothic tradition as a whole, which is rich and varied and which influenced all of the writers Jones identifies as key to understanding the carnivalesque tradition. In essence, Jones’s study is sometimes chronological without being historical. One suspects that this inattention to literary and historical interconnectedness and interdisciplinarity lies in his desire to render carnival gothics as distinct from other forms of the Gothic, particularly

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those works that are more “literary,” ones that require more systematic study and critical depth. After all, Jones’s principal argument is that the carnival gothics are all about their momentary textual pleasures, and not more cerebral, complex thematics. Still, the real issue is that Jones’s binary distinction becomes strained if one considers the broader sweep of Gothic history, especially since pundits, from the eighteenth century on, have always criticized the Gothic for being superficial, for catering to baser desire, for evoking the darkness from within. Indeed, Gothic Studies became a field precisely because it wished to show the richness of the genre, in all its forms, European and American. Frederick Burwick’s and Marjean Purinton’s works on the theatrical gothic, George Haggerty’s on the queer Gothic, and Diane Long Hoeveler’s work on Gothic feminism, Catholic chapbooks, and even an edition of Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym* would enhance the insights of Jones’s notion of carnival gothics—they do not diminish it. In many ways, his chapter on Stephen King, which attempts to contrast, and not always positively, the violent, carnivalesque elements of *Carrie* and *It* to the more affected, intentionally literary, if also violent, Gothic of Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison, would be more convincing had Jones demonstrated the textual and theoretical continuities of these writers rather than their ideological discontinuities, especially since King, despite his precarious perch within the literary community, still nonetheless grapples with literary and pictorial art and its depths, notably in his relatively recent work *Duma Key*.

But the real link between the carnivalesque and the literary gothic, the connection that makes the carnivalesque even more important to internalize, is the presence of satire within the genre, both locally within the carnivalesque and more generally within the broad range of the Gothic. It is hard not to view the horrifying surfaces of carnival gothics without it, on either side of the pleasurable/cerebral divide. To be fair, Jones does recognize the comic turn in the Gothic, but he eschews criticism that delves into a critical examination of its meaning within the carnivalesque. For example, Jones devotes much discussion to Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” as a Christian allegory, as a way of contrasting the story with Poe’s “The Black Cat,” which for Jones is an example of “practical” horror, as opposed to the more literary horror contained by Hawthorne. But is not Hawthorne’s ending a subversive wink to the reader who skeptically views Young Goodman Brown’s easy acceptance

of what he sees a satire, in other words, of Puritanism? Or, in the following chapter, is not Jones’s belief in Lovecraft’s insistence on the “articulation of horror” as “an end to itself” undermined by his Gothic McGuffins—both “sexless” narrators and monstrous antagonists, who Jones himself points out are “only representations,” ciphers that never completely come into focus (81)? Do not Lovecraft’s horrific creations become objects of satire precisely because of our desire to *de-cipher* them? Is this narrative strategy not a striking metacommentary that, to a limited extent, subverts the “practice” of Gothic horror, as Jones has outlined it? As a result, is not Lovecraft actually satirizing his own enterprise from the very beginning? And are not even the immediate pleasures of Gothic film and television often undermined by the patter of satirical commentary and narrative intrusion? Rod Serling’s *Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* drogeries, the maniacal but laughing *bon mots* of the Crypt-Keeper, the mordant wit of the grandfather in *The Lost Boys*, Lestat’s impatience with Louis’s two centuries of whining in *Interview with a Vampire* all point to the paradox of not taking carnival gothics too seriously and not taking them seriously enough. Jones makes a convincing case for not missing the pleasure of the Gothic text through the overanalysis and overinterpretation of texts in carnival gothics. And yet *understanding* Gothic pleasure, as Stephen King might say, is necessary to feed our hungry alligators—of the mind as well as the body. Bakhtin, Benjamin, and Bourdieu would have asked for no less.